

Telephone interview with Russell O'Day, former hospital corpsman, C Company, 1st Engineers Battalion, 1st Marine Division, Korea. Chosin Reservoir. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, 24 July 2000.

Where are you from?

Originally Winchester, Massachusetts.

When did you join the Navy?

October 20, 1947. I was 17 years old.

Did you have get special permission?

My mother had to sign the papers.

When did you decide you wanted to be a corpsman?

About the time I got out of boot camp they were asking people to go to different schools. At that time, the Navy wasn't the best in telling people what these various schools were--aviation machinist mate, sheet metal worker, signalman, or whatever. They weren't very good in telling you what these different rates were or what they did. After boot camp I was in an outgoing unit getting ready to go to a ship and they came asking for volunteers to go to different schools. At that time I didn't know what a hospital corpsman was. I asked them about the school they were talking about. I was at Great Lakes, where I had just gotten out of boot camp. They said the [Hospital] Corps school was on the other side of the base. If you went to that school, you'd get two long weekends off, a short weekend, and a duty weekend. I had been in the Navy about 4 months and that sounded pretty good. And that's how I ended up there. It sounds pretty stupid but that's the way it happened.

What happened when you got out of the corps school?

The last couple of weeks of school they started talking about some corpsmen going with the Marines. I said, "Wait a minute. I joined the Navy so I wouldn't have to go through the mud and slop." After corps school I ended up as staff at the Naval Hospital at Great Lakes for about a year. Then I got my orders to Camp Pendleton in early 1949.

What do you remember about that experience?

I remember that this was exactly what I didn't want to do--being with the Army or the Marines. "Here I go," I thought. I went through Pendleton in '49 and it was very good duty being with the Marines in peacetime. Things were kind of peaceful and relaxed. Of course, all these Marines had already gone through boot camp in San Diego. In fact, Harry Truman was trying to get rid of the Marine Corps in 1949. Back in 1949 the Marine Corps was very small compared to other times.

Where were you when you heard the war had broken out in Korea?

I was at the First Shore Party Battalion at Camp Pendleton, actually across the street at Camp Del Mar. My 3-year enlistment was up in October of 1950. When the Korean War started, the President extended everybody's enlistments for 1 year whether you liked it or not. Everybody got extended. I just went ahead and reenlisted. I knew I was going to Korea. I figured if I got killed I'd die rich because in those days I got a \$360 reenlistment bonus. I never saw that much money. I was young and single and had no big family life. I decided to stay in the Navy for 20 years.

Were there any special preparations for going over to Korea?

The 1st Marine Division at that time was only about half its normal strength so they were bringing in Marines from Camp Lejeune, Parris Island, and San Diego. When I reenlisted I had to go back up to the medical battalion from the shore party battalion. The Division now needed corpsmen in every outfit. When I heard engineers, I thought they built bridges and fixed roads in the rear. That sounded like a good outfit so they put me down for engineers. What a mistake that was. So I went on a ship with the engineers at San Diego heading for Japan for the Inchon landing.

For the Inchon operation I was on an LST. Heading for the beach at Inchon, I peeked over the side of this landing craft and realized there was nobody in front of us. I asked this sergeant what was going on. He told me we were to go in and blow up the sea wall.

So we were the first ones to hit the beach and they blew a big hole in the sea wall so the other landing craft could run right up on the beach. Before they blew it, you had to go up to the wall and crawl over it.

They must have been shooting at you guys too.

There wasn't that much fire. It wasn't like many of the invasions of the Second World War where there were thousands of Japanese shooting at the landing craft. We took some fire at Inchon but they had caught them completely by surprise. The North Koreans had absolutely no idea that the Marines were going to land there. They thought they were going to land at Wonsan around the other side of the peninsula. And that place was mined. At Inchon they didn't have anything. Theoretically, it wasn't a good place to land because the tide goes out so far every 12 hours that all ships would be sitting high and dry. It wasn't the place normal people would land.

What kind of medical gear did you have?

I had a small pouch full of bandages, morphine. After a day or two they came along and gave us units of plasma in a box. It almost got me killed.

What happened?

Later on, after we went to Inchon, we went to the Han River and there again the engineers were down there first. I asked one of the sergeants what we were doing down there first. After we went across the Han River and went into Seoul, that's when we got the plasma. It was in a box with two bottles in it. I guess the units were about 5 inches long, 2 ½ inches in diameter. One had the powder, the other the liquid. You mixed them together and they made plasma. This box was very inconvenient to carry. So I took my two cans out of there and took some tape and taped them to the bottom of the pack on my back. I thought that was a good thing to do.

Before the Korean War started, at Camp Pendleton, corpsmen had very little training. We did not have FMF school like we have now for hospital corpsmen. We just went with the outfit we were with--a shore party battalion or whatever. But as far as hospital corps training--dragging people out from under fire and this type of thing--we had absolutely nothing. There was no school at all. And, of course, we didn't have the same kind of training the Marines had gotten in boot camp. So I put these two units on the back of my pack and that was a mistake. The second mistake was . . . The Marine dungarees of that time had PFC, sergeant, or corporal's stripes with big stencils on both arms. Being a hospital corpsman, all I had was HN stenciled on my left arm. Therefore, I didn't have anything on my right arm. The third mistake was walking in the middle of the unit single file on the outskirts of Seoul. I had a .45 as a weapon and all the Marines had carbines or M1's. That was another mistake. If you're a sniper up in a building and you're going to shoot somebody, here's a guy with a .45. That indicates he's probably an officer. He has no rank stenciled on his arm. That indicates he's an officer. He's got these two cans on his pack. Nobody else has these two cans. That tells the sniper something. And then the guy is walking in the middle of the group. So a sniper took a shot and guess who he shot at? He put a bullet dead-center through these cans of plasma. He probably thought they were demolitions and if they blew they'd get the whole lot of us. That's the only shot he got off but I learned a whole bunch of things right there. But I should of learned all that at Camp Pendleton before the war started.

But he didn't get you.

No. He just got the cans. If he had aimed at my head he would have gotten me. He was a good shot. I got rid of that .45 and got a carbine. I stenciled some rates on my right arm. I got rid of those two cans on my back, and just blended in with the troops. That's what they do now.

What happened after this incident?

We went into Seoul. Again, the engineers were out front. We had to go in and clear the land mines so they didn't blow up the tanks. Of course, the gooks were shooting at our tanks with anti-tank weapons. And we were between the gooks and the tanks.

Do you remember the first casualty you treated?

Oh, I had already treated a couple. The first one I ever treated was an old man, a Korean civilian, one of those papasans who wore those old stove pipe hats. The guy had been shot a couple of times. I did what I could, gave him a shot of morphine, patched him up as best I could, and put him in a protected area hoping some civilians would come along and find him. I have no idea what happened to the man.

What about your first military casualty?

The first one I treated was on the outskirts of Seoul. We were in a fox hole and the gooks had some snipers shooting at us. And the Marines had snipers shooting back. This sergeant, a friend of mine, was sharing a fox hole we'd dug. He said, "I've got to get out of this damn hole." I told him, "Man, don't get out of this hole. You'll get your head blown off." But he decided he had to go. He crawled out of that hole and . . . Blam! He got hit right through the arm. It went through the meat in the upper part of his arm. Luckily it didn't hit the bone. I patched him up and sent him to the rear. He was the first one.

Then we went into downtown Seoul, down the main drag pulling up land mines in front of the tanks. I was over by a building trying to keep out of the way when this guy got hit out in the middle of the street. He must have had his rifle up at port arms or something because it hit his M1 first shattering it. The bullet, or whatever it was, went on and hit him in the chest. I went out there and dragged him out of the middle of the road and up into a building. He was a typical Marine. At that time, they taught Marines in boot camp that if you lost your weapon, they'd take \$67 dollars out of your pay. And they drummed that into Marines' heads in boot camp. Well, this guy's weapon is shattered out there in the middle of the road, and I have him up in that building where I'm patching him up. All the time he kept moaning and groaning, "Get my weapon. I lost my weapon. Go get my weapon."

"Man, I'm not running out in that damn road for your busted up weapon. But he kept moaning and groaning.

Was that Gunny Gigg?

Yes it was.

He told me the story. He kept yelling over and over again, "Go out and get my weapon." And he remembers you saying something like, "Hey, I saved your ass. I'm not going to save your weapon."

I might have said that. I know I wasn't going out in the street to get that rifle.

Where did you go after you took Seoul?

The whole division went back to Inchon. Then we went around to Wonsan. I was on the same LST I was on when we went to Inchon.

What do you remember about going ashore at Wonsan?

The South Koreans and Americans had already taken it having come up from the south. I remember laying off Wonsan watching one of our battleships firing 16-inch shells at this smokestack sitting along the coast. It seemed pretty expensive to use 16-inch shells to knock down a smokestack.

Did you go on up to Chosin Reservoir with the others?

Yes. But before we did, we got in a convoy of vehicles heading up a mountain single file when the gooks ambushed us. Everybody jumped out of the trucks and began hiding behind them. Two or three vehicles back, they were calling for a corpsman. To run back there you had to expose yourself as you ran between vehicles. But I was 19 then and could run pretty fast. I went back and there was a Marine sitting there with both his hands over his mouth and blood coming out between his fingers. I figured he'd had been shot clean through the mouth. I looked around the back of his head, felt around, but couldn't find any blood. When I pulled his hands away from his mouth he had two teeth and a bullet in his hand. A gook had fired a burp gun from an extreme distance and one of the slugs had hit this guy in the mouth with just enough force to knock out both teeth. And the guy spit out the bullet. If I'm not mistaken, I think there were some articles about this incident back here in the U.S. "Tough Marine Spits Out Bullet," or something like that.

So, this was on the way up to Chosin.

No. This was at Wonsan. We were going up a mountain near Wonsan; I don't know why. I was just a corpsman going along for the ride. After that we did head north. Just before we started up into the mountains, it was Thanksgiving day. They brought up food from the rear. They had turkey, cranberry sauce, everything. It was delicious. I remember that distinctly. So we ate a big meal and the next thing we knew we went up to Chosin. There are a lot of things I don't remember up there.

Do you remember the withdrawal from Chosin?

Oh yes. When we got up to Chosin, C Company engineers went to the airfield and tried to improve it so we could get planes in and out of there. They were working on that 24 hours a day. I didn't know we were being surrounded. The first I knew we were in trouble I looked down the road and saw some 105mm artillery in a complete circle facing outwards. I might have been a corpsman but I understood what that meant.

It must have been pretty tough treating casualties in that freezing cold. Did you find that the cold weather stopped the hemorrhage?

Yes. I'd go along with that. Of course, they had a lot of clothes on too. We bandaged right over the clothes.

Do you remember the frostbite?

Oh yes. I think everybody got some. In fact, at the reunions I go to now, you always see some guys with missing fingers.

Didn't the morphine freeze?

They say some of the guys held it in their mouths. I put mine inside my t-shirt next to my body and that kept it warm enough.

You couldn't use plasma; it was too cold.

We didn't use any plasma. In fact, I didn't see any. If you ask anybody the biggest thing they remember, the first thing they will say is the cold. Marines are taught to clean and oil their weapons. If you clean and oil your weapon at 35 below zero that sucker will freeze. There's a bunch of people who got killed before they realized that. Don't oil your weapon.